

Combat Moon

By John Whitman

The hologram of the S'krrr warrior lunged at Mika with its bladelike forearms. Mika spun aside, jabbing his practice dagger into its abdomen.

"Penetration of lower thorax," Leda's voice came over the loudspeaker. "Result: severed nerve column."

The holographic S'krrr shimmered and altered slightly. Now it was holding a two-meter staff with a blade at one end. An energy pike. Swinging the pike, the S'krrr attacked again. Mika ducked the sweeping blow and slipped around the insectoid-hologram as his dagger blade passed through the two small, diaphanous wings on its back.

The hologram froze. Leda's voice again came over the loudspeaker, this time slightly bewildered. "Dismemberment of vestigial wings. The S'krrr don't even need those wings, Mika. No damage."

Mika Streev wiped a thin sheen of sweat from his forehead. He could see Leda through the transparisteel window of the practice room's control booth.

"Psychological damage, Leda," he panted. "The S'krrr use those wings to speak their traditional language. Also, they're a hard target, and therefore an honorable one."

The practice room door slid open with a sigh, and Leda Kyss stood framed in the portal. Like Mika, she wore the red bandoleer of a Rabaanite warrior, heavily stitched with merit-signs. Unlike Mika, her bandolier lacked the symbol of Rabaan's highest honor: the sunburst sigil of an artist who has created his masterpiece.

Leda strode forward and pointed at the hologram of the S'krrr. Standing 1.7 meters tall, the gray insectoid looked like a series of sharp angles designed to intimidate. Its large black eyes gleamed coldly, set high on the S'krrr's triangular head. A hard-shelled exoskeleton covered even the face, making the mantis-like S'krrr's emotions inscrutable to all but the most attentive humans.

Leda pointed at the formidable looking creature. "You're fighting a single combat that will decide the future of Rabaan. How can you bring up honor and artistry at a time like this?"

Mika grinned. "What better time to bring it up? You think I'm going to let a little political debate about which species destroyed who's orbital platform get in my way? That's for bureaucrats to decide. Me, I hone my skills. That's the whole point of being a warrior, isn't it?"

Leda's face grew suddenly distant. "Here, maybe. Not everywhere..." she muttered.

"Leda, are you okay? You've been in a daze for months. Maybe you picked up something on Circarpous IV. Don't know why you bothered to go off-planet in the first place."

"To see what's out there, Mika. You may be the best artist-warrior on Rabaan, but there's more to life than combat rituals. It's a big galaxy out there, and trust me, there are places half a day's jump from Rabaan where they don't care how the battle is won. They'll wipe out a planet to get at one person."

Mika sneered. "Barbarians! I'm surprised the Empire doesn't put a stop to that sort of brutishness."

Leda frowned, but said nothing.

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One hundred eighty-six million kilometers closer to the Ishanna system's yellow sun, the planet S'krrr made its way steadily through the vacuum of space. Forty kilometers of atmosphere shielded the living creatures of S'krrr from that vacuum. One half kilometer of forest canopy shaded the top soil of S'krrr from the system's hot sun. Two meters of duracrete lay between that top soil and the ceiling of the small subterranean chamber where Sh'shak of the S'krrr had chosen the mantra of distance for his meditation exercise.

He, too, was preparing for battle. As a part of his mind continued the mantra of distance, Sh'shak considered the events that had led to this confrontation. One of the Rabaanites' orbital platforms had been destroyed in a shuttle accident (*two meters from a human's head to his feet, head roughly 20 centimeters high...*), an accident which the Rabaanites blamed on the S'krrr. The innocent S'krrr had defended themselves against the accusation, and tempers had risen until war seemed inevitable.

Sh'shak ran one of his blade-like arms (*one-half meter from blade-tip to elbow joint, one-half meter from elbow joint to abdominal link...*) along the ridge of his forehead in a soothing motion. Fortunately, Rabaan and S'krrr had long ago learned to settle their disputes in a civilized fashion. When political solutions could not be found, each planet chose a champion. The two warriors met on neutral ground -- a small, barren planetoid called the Combat Moon. Only one warrior ever left those meetings, and his planet was declared the winner of the dispute.

Sh'shak pressed a button on a nearby console and called up an anatomical display of human body structure. He was reviewing the variety of targets available to him. He did so calmly. He felt no malice toward humans in general, and certainly none for the Rabaanites, for whom he had high regard. But the Combat had been called for, and he, Sh'shak of the warrior caste, had been chosen. He would go to the Combat Moon and kill the Rabaanite he encountered there. And if, as Sh'shak expected, the human warrior proved worthy, Sh'shak would compose a short lyric for him in wing-song.

At the mere thought of wing-song, Sh'shak's small vestigial wings fluttered, rubbing against one another in a gentle *s'krrrrrrr* that had become the species' name in Basic. Millennia of interplanetary activity had convinced the S'krrr to adopt Basic for most communications. But they still kept up their far more difficult -- and far more beautiful -- wing-song language for ceremonial and artistic purposes.

Lost in the sound of wing-song, Sh'shak switched from the mantra of distance to the mantra of balance, as his wings continued to murmur.

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The low murmur in the Star Destroyer *Coercion's* conference room hushed as Governor Klime entered the room. The Imperial officers seated around the table called him "governor" in deference to his new post as overlord of the Ishanna system and the surrounding systems, but in their minds he was still *General* Klime, the brutal tactician who had brought a dozen worlds to heel for the Empire.

Slow-minded officers wondered why Klime had ever agreed to leave the military for a civilian post. The quick-minded knew, as Klime did, that in these days of the Rebellion, the military no longer offered enough flexibility for the truly ambitious. As a governor, Klime could still use the military to intimidate weak planets, and, in the case of strong planets like Rabaan and S'krrr, rely on subtler means to get what he wanted.

"Report."

An aide snapped to attention. "Despite continued rumors, we have been unable to locate a Rebel base anywhere in the Ishanna system. Intelligence is skeptical of the reliability of the rumors. Our man on Rabaan tells us that the S'krrr and the Rabaanites have arranged for a ritual combat."

"Is our man in place?"

"No, sir. He failed to position himself properly. He is awaiting your instructions."

"Place and time of the Combat?"

"The single moon of Rabaan, known as Combat Moon. Coordinates-- "

"If the moon is in Rabaanite orbit," Klime growled, "our ships may be detected."

"N-no, sir," the aide stuttered. "Both the Rabaanites and the S'krrr are notoriously uninterested in space traffic and travel. Also, Combats traditionally take place at the moon's apogee, when it is too distant for either planet's sensors to make clear readings."

Klime put his hands together, fingers forming a steeple. "Continue."

"Yes, sir. The two combatants will be set down at random locations. Then they will... hunt each other. Time: 1800 hours, two local days from now."

Klime smiled cruelly, and crushed the steeple of his hands into two tight fists. "Commander Glave."

"Sir!" The Imperial commando leaped to his feet, his small eyes staring straight ahead out of pock-marks etched like valleys in his scarred face. Anyone else would have been called a bootlicker for zeal like his, but Glave inspired the kind of sheer terror that prevented such sneering. A veteran of 30 small- and large-scale engagements, Commander Glave had never lost a battle. In a firefight on Kestos Minor, Glave's helmet was

shattered by a point-blank blaster shot, pushing fragments of dura-armor into his face. Ignoring the pain, Glave single-handedly held off a platoon of Rebels until armored AT-ATs had arrived.

Governor Klime eyed this killing machine like a soldier admiring a newly-charged blaster. "Assemble your men, Commander. And call in our local informant as well. When those two locals arrive at this Combat Moon, I want your team ready and waiting."

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"Mika, I'm waiting!" Leda pounded on the door. "Mika!"

"Here." Leda whirled as the voice whispered in her ear. Instinctively she drew her dagger and slashed. Mika caught her wrist with casual ease and kissed her quickly on the lips. The young woman tugged her hand away and sheathed the blade.

"Don't ever do that!" Leda yelled. "I might have hurt you!"

Mika shrugged. "Just wanted to see how your reflexes were. Pretty good. But you shouldn't let people sneak up on you like that."

Leda grumbled and stalked toward the door. "Most people don't walk with their feet off the ground like you do, Mika. Come on. And don't kiss me in public!"

Mika grinned at Leda's shyness. It was old-fashioned, that Rabaanite prohibition against public displays of emotion among the un-Promised. But since Mika had failed to offer her his Promise, he couldn't really complain about her prudishness. He suspected it was only her way of telling him he'd better act soon.

The door slid open and they walked down the Arcade, the long main hall of the Gymnasium. The Gymnasium covered five full city blocks in the center of Ban Belos, the capital city of Rabaan. The multi-level complex served as living quarters, training center and competitive arena for Rabaan's best warriors. The very cream of the crop, such as Mika, were provided with personal suites and private training studios just off the Arcade. It was the most prestigious address on the planet.

In the hours before Mika's departure for the Combat, Gymnasium security had made the Arcade off-limits to everyone but residents. As Mika and Leda passed by the long stone columns, their footsteps echoed in the empty space.

"It's like a ghost town," Leda said. "Spoke too soon."

Coming toward them down the hall was a very tall man -- so tall that he had to duck under an archway to keep from banging his dark-haired head on a decorative stone beam. His red bandoleer hung lazily across his lanky frame, but the sunburst sigil had been polished to a conspicuous shine.

"Mika Streev," the tall man said through a tight smile. "Is it that time already?"

"Hello, Andos," Mika said. "Leda, you know Andos, don't you? My neighbor -- with the second best apartment in the Arcade."

The grin never left Andos' face. "They would have given me yours, Mika, but they had to save it for someone of smaller stature." He turned to Leda. "Pleased to meet you."

Leda nodded her head. "I recognize you from the Games, of course."

Andos yawned. "Yes, yes, my name has become a household word since I lost to Mika in the finals for the right to champion Rabaan. Every teenager on the planet now thinks of me as 'that other contestant.' Well, well, they say things always work out for the best. Good luck against the shell-head, Mika."

His tight smile beamed down at them again, and he passed on, his long legs carrying him nimbly down the Arcade.

Leda watched him go. "There's bitter soil to plant a bad seed in."

Mika shrugged. "Sour grapes, that's all. It's tough to be second best at something. I think Andos had his heart set on championing Rabaan this time."

They reached the entrance to the Arcade, an antique wooden gate, supposedly the original gate to the old Gymnasium in ancient days. Beyond, they could hear a low and constant murmur.

Leda paused and took a deep breath. "Are you ready?" Mika nodded. "Please don't make a scene. We've got more important things to do."

Mika nodded again.

The gate opened with a loud creak, and the two humans were assaulted by a storm of light and noise. Cheers erupted from the crowd that had waited hours for a glimpse of Mika Streev, the champion of Rabaan.

"Mika! Mika!" "Get 'em, son!"

"We're counting on you, Mika!"

Mika grinned broadly and waved back at the crowd. As he stepped forward, the mass of people flowed to either side like parting waters, clearing a path to his waiting shuttle. Grizzled old Rabaanite men, star-struck girls, and young boys dreaming of glory all reached out to touch his shoulder or his arm. "I stood this close to Mika Streev," they'd tell their grandchildren.

Leda followed a step behind with a shadow on her brow. Members of the holonews caught every beaming smile, every wink, every laugh, in the lenses of their palm-sized holo-cams and beamed the images around the globe. Rabaan was sending its star warrior off to defend the honor of the planet, and the press was eating it up. At the shuttle Mika turned and raised his hands, and the crowd erupted anew. A hundred lenses reflected her image as Leda tugged at Mika's sleeve and motioned toward the shuttle, and a billion holos around the planet copied Mika's innocent shrug as he turned back to his adoring fans.

The shuttle's departure was delayed for half an hour while Mika basked in their adoration.

Finally, Leda dragged Mika into the shuttle and the automated door hummed closed and locked. Leda dropped into the pilot's seat and brooded over her controls, loading coordinates into the nav computer and slapping switches until the pocket cruiser's engines groaned to life. Having ridden the sleek new ships so readily available throughout the galaxy, Leda was painfully aware of how backward Rabaan had become. Its people simply were not interested in space travel, and it showed in their small, dilapidated fleet. She felt like she was piloting a rowboat.

The antique cruiser shuddered as the repulsorlift engines seemed to push the planet away from them. After a few moments, they were lifted into the stratosphere. With an irritated flick of her fingers, Leda activated an obsolete Hoersch-Kessel ion drive that threw the reluctant ship forward.

As soon as the ancient pocket cruiser settled into a smooth flight path, Leda turned to Mika.

"You're disgusting."

"What?" he asked innocently.

"How could you do that!"

"Do wh--?"

"Stand there soaking in all that glory like this was some game of Mon Calamari dive-ball!"

Mika blinked. "What are Mon Calamaris?"

"Oh, space!" Leda slammed her fist into the cruiser's bulkhead. "That's right, I forgot. You've never been off planet. You've never seen what's going on out there! You've never given a thought to anything farther than your next trophy!"

Mika had seen Leda Kyss fight for her life. He'd seen her train 10 hours a day, every day for a year, to earn her red bandoleer. He'd seen her cry in frustration after losing matches in the Games, and he'd seen her punch a hole in the wall over a false rumor that he was cheating on her. But he'd never seen her this angry about anything. The warrior in him wanted to snap back, to match her aggression with his own. But the lover in him wouldn't allow it.

"Leda," he said patiently. "I don't understand. Rabaan's had a warrior caste for as long as anyone can remember, and you and I are part of it. This is what we are. This is what we do. Not just me -- both of us."

Leda put her head in her hands. "It's just that sometimes I get so angry... "

"Why? You didn't used to, and I know I haven't changed. What has?"

Leda looked up. Her eyes were moist with tears, but her face was taut with frustration. At first Mika thought it was directed at him, but then he saw her staring past him, through him, out toward something huge and distant that angered and terrified her. The muscles in her jaw worked angrily. Then she released the tension in one long, exhausted breath.

"Oh, Mika. There's so much I wish I could tell you. I trust you... but I can't."

Mika gently touched her wrist with hands that could break bones with ease. "Leda, did something happen to you off-planet? Did someone do something to you...?"

"Yes!" Leda said. "But nothing bad -- unless you call growing up a bad thing. I met... some people off-planet, Mika. They showed me what was going on in the galaxy. They showed me-- " Her voice dropped to a whisper and she looked around suspiciously, as though the curved bulkhead of the old ship were leaning in to eavesdrop. " They showed me that the Empire is evil."

There was silence.

Mika cocked his head to one side. He didn't know what to say. Leda might as well have told him that the air was evil, or the soil of Rabaan was evil. The Empire was the Empire -- as much a fact and foundation of life as the air or the soil: sometimes benign, sometimes troublesome, but always, always, fundamental to the natural order of things.

At least he had always thought so, until he looked into Leda's eyes as she pleaded with him to understand.

"The Empire takes planets by force. They destroy governments. They enslave whole populations--"

"Ridiculous!" Mika snorted. "If that happened, we'd know all about it--"

"How?" Leda snapped back. "Over the newsnets? Who controls the newsnets? The Empire!"

"Yeah, but there are other ways. Merchants. Tourists. There's a lot of traffic going through hyperspace. Word would get around."

"Word does get around, Mika," Leda said. "The Rebels make sure of that. They're organized. They're fighting back... and lately they've even been winning."

"Rebels?" Mika laughed. "Organized? You believe that nonsense? The Rebel Alliance is nothing but a load of bantha fodder spread by gossiping merchants and..." He paused.

"Tourists?" Leda finished.

Confident she had won the debate, she returned to her instruments.

Mika studied Leda for a moment, studied her with eyes trained to assess the skills of a worthy opponent. He saw a new power in his old friend, a power unfamiliar to him. He had seen warriors gain confidence as they mastered new weapons, but this was different. Leda Kyss had not entered a new phase of her soldiering. Somewhere, out in the cosmos, she had entered a larger world.

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On the far side of the Combat Moon, a S'krrr cruiser arced in a single orbit around the satellite's gray surface. Aboard the vessel, Sh'shak glided across the cargo hold between rows of mantis-like companions. None of them spoke. There were no parting words in S'krrr, neither good luck nor good-bye. There was only the graceful fluttering of the wings of memory.

Sh'shak entered the small escape pod and quickly checked its instruments. The pod was designed for a single atmospheric reentry. Once it touched down, it would become a useless heap of melted wiring and cracked repulsor casings.

Next Sh'shak calmly checked his only weapon -- a two-meter telescoping energy pike. Skrrr-human combats were traditional and honorable, as well as violent. Both sides preferred to use traditional hand-to-hand weapons.

Of course, one may be prudent as well as honorable, Sh'shak thought as he patted the small hold-out blaster hidden in his belt. Lastly, Sh'shak checked the portable commnet uplink in his pack -- or rather, the half of the uplink in his possession. The human would have the other half. Alone, each unit was useless. When fitted together, the device could send a signal strong enough to reach either Rabaan or S'krrr, where each side waited anxiously. The first triumphant word spoken on that commnet channel would send rescue ships racing toward the moon -- and signal victory. For the losers, there would only be silence.

Sh'shak triggered a mechanism and the hatch door closed. Without ceremony he pressed a switch, and the escape pod burst out of its mothership's belly like a steely newborn leaping toward its first moments of life. Then the onboard computers came online, and the pod steadied into a landing vector. Sh'shak glanced out the viewport at the swiftly growing moon. Somewhere nearby, he knew, his human opponent was doing the same.

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There was smoke and heat. The world spun and shook and then roared to a jarring halt.

Mika coughed amid the fumes and the crackle of fusing circuits.

He kicked blindly and the escape pod hatch gave way. Smoke poured out and Mika followed it into the thin air of Combat Moon.

The moon's thin atmosphere supported little life. Stunted, spiny trees thrust up from the gray waste, splotching the tundra with patches of green and brown. Localized tectonic activity had rifled the plains with long spines of low, jagged hills, as though a giant had cut furrows with a colossal plow.

Waving away thin wisps of smoke, Mika reached into the pod and grabbed his pack. With fluid grace he slipped a thin stiletto into its wrist sheath, then strapped his long Ibarsi knife across his back warrior-fashion, the sheath resting diagonally from left hip to right shoulder. Although called a knife, the Ibarsi was nearly as long as a lightsaber. However, it's only power source was Mika Streev's good right arm.

Mika hefted the pack with its remaining contents -- emergency rations, his half of the uplink array, and a palm-sized blaster (just in case) -- and set out.

He did not know the S'krrr's landing coordinates. But he did know this: both pods had been programmed to land near the equator. The S'krrr would have touched down somewhere near the terminus of night. Glancing up at the mid-morning sun, Mika tightened the straps on his back and headed east.

The hunt was on.

"Do you think they did it?"

Leda's question came back to him. In orbit around Combat Moon, she had broken their journey's silence with that query.

"Do you think they did it?"

"Hmm?" Mika had been deep in thought. "Who? Did what?"

"The S'krrr. Do you think they destroyed our orbital platform?"

"Oh. I don't know. I haven't thought about it. I mean, if it wasn't them, who was it?"

Leda frowned. "Someone who would benefit from a conflict between Rabaan and S'krrr. Someone who'd like to see both planets weakened by an infra-system war."

By now Mika recognized the tone in her voice. "The Empire?"

"Who else?"

Mika shrugged. He had had enough of this Rebel-rousing. Besides, he had a duel to win. "Well, they'll be disappointed. This conflict is only going to end with one dead S'krrr."

Leda's voice softened. The light in her eyes softened from anger to fear -- fear for him.

"Mika, if it is the Empire, they won't be satisfied with that. They've gone to too much trouble already."

"What are you suggesting, Leda? Or should I say, what are your friends suggesting, since this sounds like you repeating their words."

Almost tenderly, she explained, "My ... friends ... think the Empire wants to get a tighter grip on this system without resorting to brute force. A planetary conflict would be the perfect excuse to bring in a strong garrison, and sabotaging the Combat would be an easy way to start a war."

Mika squinted. "And these friends of yours. Where are they?"

Leda's voice had fallen to a whisper. "Closer than you think."

But he refused to get drawn into her conspiratorial mood and leaned back, frowning skeptically.

Realizing she had failed, Leda leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "Good luck, Mika. And keep your eyes open."

Shifting his pack, Mika touched his cheek where her lips had brushed against him. His skin still tingled.

He had known Leda since they were children, playing the mock warrior games of Rabaan. He remembered sitting across from her in the throwing circle, target-shooting with her when they were old enough to hold dart-guns. He even remembered the first time that, despite his competitive spirit, he had let her win at Knives. He could not remember a time when he did not want to be with her, when he did not care for her.

But not until she returned from her off-world trip with her new attitude and her alien ideas did he realize that he loved her.

As soon as the Combat is over, he told himself, I'll ask her to make the Promise with me.

She would agree, he was sure of it. Leda was his perfect match, and--

Mika heard a noise. He dropped into a crouch and slipped into a copse of stunted trees, waiting. He heard it again -- the tinny chink of metal on metal. Instantly, all thoughts of Leda and the future left him. He was a warrior, and he'd found his prey.

Sh'shak heard the sound of branches scraping in the heavy air. He froze in place, his skeletal face an implacable mask as he achieved an utter stillness impossible for most species. He listened.

Somewhere, one leaf touched another. Slowly, very slowly, Sh'shak drew his weapon.

Mika stepped lightly, avoiding twigs, leaning away from branches that might make noise, as he crept toward his target. The noise came from the other side of the copse. The Ibarsi knife slid soundlessly from its sheath.

Reaching the edge of the stunted grove, Mika gently pulled back a branch, and almost gasped out loud. Below him in a dusty glen sat two pocket cruisers, their dull white hulls coated with a layer of gray dust. Two men in familiar clothing sat together. Rabaanites. But here?

They were assembling some sort of tech device. That was the metallic sound Mika had heard.

Why would there be more Rabaanites on Combat Moon?

Mika studied the scene suspiciously. The pocket cruisers had all the looks of Rabaanite ships -- antiquated, patched, and sulking on their landing gear like unappreciated banthas. The men, too, looked Rabaanite in their brown robes and red bandoleers. He didn't recognize them, but of course he couldn't claim to know every warrior in the Gymnasium.

A third man stepped out of one of the cruisers, so tall he had to duck to avoid the bulkhead.

"Andos!"

The word leaped from Mika's lips. The two men on the ground whirled and drew their weapons, but Andos yelled, "Don't blast him!" With remarkable discipline, the two men held their fire.

Mika stood up and jogged down the slope into the glen. He eyed the two Rabaanites carefully. Something about their appearance bothered him. Their clothes were Rabaanite, their faces were Rabaanite, the tools they used to assemble their machine looked Rabaanite...

"Mika!" Andos said in a voice full of concern. "Are you all right?"

Mika blinked. "Of course. I've only just arrived. What are you doing here?"

Andos frowned and put a friendly hand on Mika's shoulder. "Just after you left we received intelligence that the S'krrr were planning to sabotage the Combat. There's a whole platoon of shell-heads waiting to ambush you." He nodded toward the other two men. "The Assembly sent us here to back you up and we almost turned out the engines on these old wrecks beating you here. This is Jan, and that's--"

"Wait a minute," Mika mumbled. "Since when do the S'krrr dishonor Combat? Their whole culture is about codes and honor."

Andos sighed. "I don't think the shell-heads had much choice." The tall warrior looked to his two companions for confirmation.

The one called Jan nodded and grumbled, "It's the Empire. They're moving in, forcing the S'krrr against us."

Mika was still confused. But what Andos said seemed to fit Leda's warning. After all, she hadn't known what the Empire was up to, just that they were planning "something." Maybe this was it. And, personal feelings aside, if the Assembly had wanted to reinforce the Combat, Andos, as runner-up, was the logical choice to send.

He relaxed. "All right, Andos, tell me everything you know." Mika moved past the other two warriors and stepped over the disassembled machine they were working on. His eyes widened. Even field stripped, he recognized it: a mint condition Balmorran M-5 repeating blaster cannon polished to a high shine. Only one type of soldier in the galaxy had access to weapons like that. "Stormtroop--!"

The barrel of a blaster crashed down on his neck, smothering the word. The blow jarred him to the teeth and he dropped his Ibarsi knife, but in the same motion Mika rolled forward and came up on his feet. His quick reflexes startled the two disguised troopers, but not Andos. The tall warrior was already in flight, delivering an elaborate spinning kick. Mika side-stepped and lashed out with two rigid fingers that connected with Andos' throat in mid-air. Gagging, the Rabaanite fell to the ground in a heap.

The two stormtroopers swarmed him. That was their mistake. Given time to think, Mika might have hesitated to attack two representatives of the Empire. But in the heat of the moment they were only so many fists and elbows and knees flying at him, and Mika responded as he'd been trained to do from birth. The trooper called Jan went down as Mika's foot smashed his knee. The Rabaanite champion ducked a blow from the other and was about to finish him when a mountain fell on him from behind and his legs gave out from under him.

Andos, he thought as everything went black.

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Feeling returned first. His head throbbed. Something like wire bit into his wrists, which were pinned behind his back. He was lying in the dust.

Hearing returned next. The buzzing in his head faded to angry muttering.

"We should've just blasted him." The one called Jan.

"It would have ruined everything!" Andos. "The S'krrr don't use blasters during Combat. It has to look like the S'krrr killed him. Then we kill the S'krrr and it looks like the Rabaanites betrayed the Combat. Stick to the plan."

"Easy for you to say. You're not crippled!"

Sight came back only reluctantly. Staring out of half-closed eyes, Mika saw hazy silhouettes in the bright noon sun. The faces were a blur, but he knew Andos by his height. Another, probably Jan, was on the ground, propped up on his elbows as the third man tightened a strap on his leg.

"Ah!" Jan cursed. "Space, that hurts! I'm going to kill that abo myself!"

"I'll do it."

Andos tugged at something, and a metal pole telescoped out between his hands. Mika recognized its hum from a thousand practice sessions. A S'krrr energy pike.

"Did you bind his legs?" Andos asked.

The second trooper grunted. "Stop acting like he's an SD-9 war droid with a single-track program, will ya? He's just a backwater planet-boy."

"He's a killing machine," Andos said coolly. "And should be treated like one." The tall Rabaanite started toward Mika.

"I said I'm going to kill him!" Jan struggled to his feet. One leg was stiff inside a plexi-cast. Even limping, he looked ferocious. Mika cursed himself for having been fooled, even for a moment -- the stormtroopers were warriors, true, but not artists like the Rabaanites. More like bullies.

Behind the slits of his half-closed eyes, Mika watched Jan snatch the energy pike from Andos and limp toward him. The other trooper followed with an eager, sadistic grin on his face. Andos trailed behind.

"No sense standing on ceremony." Jan raised the humming pike. Mika did not move, did not even change the rhythm of his breath -- until the moment Jan brought the pike down. In that instant the Rabaanite rolled away and the sharp blade sank half a meter into the ground. From his prostrate position, Mika aimed a side kick that shattered the plexi-cast, and Jan's knee with it. The trooper howled and staggered against his comrade.

Mika rolled up against the energy pike. Ignoring the pain, he pushed through the weapon's thin energy-sheath and rubbed his hands along the vibrating blade until he felt the wires snap. He was free, and on his feet, just as the second trooper reached for his blaster.

The Imperial was fast, but Mika was faster. The thin stiletto left its sheath, then left Mika's hand, then sank into the trooper's throat -- all before the Imperial blaster had cleared its holster.

Jan struggled to one knee, his other leg bent awkwardly behind him. He clawed at his hip, trying to clear his own blaster. Mika admired the man's willpower even as he plucked the energy pike from the ground and ended the fight.

Andos and Mika stared at one another. All his life, Andos had studied the art of war. He knew how fast a fight could end. But even he was awestruck. In the blink of an eye Mika had gone from bound and prostrate victim to combat-ready warrior, killing two Imperial stormtroopers -- two of the Emperor's elite -- in the process.

"Mika," Andos said hoarsely. "Be reasonable. You don't know what you're up against here. You're a very small fish in the biggest pond of all. You're a bug to these people, and they'll squash you." Mika shrugged and turned the energy pike to full power.

"Mika! You have no idea what's going on here."

"I know the Empire wants to garrison the system. I figure they arranged the whole conflict. I know they want to sabotage the Combat. And thanks to you, now I know how." His voice was steady. "But I'll tell you, Andos, that doesn't bother me."

"It doesn't?"

"No." Mika stepped forward. "I never much cared for political intrigue, on planet or off. Leave that to other people, see how they end up." Mika nodded toward the two corpses. "But you were going to kill me, Andos. That's a little more personal."

He took another step.

Andos hesitated, but only for a moment. He faced a man who had already beaten him once, who was probably the most skilled fighter in the whole system, who was both armed and angry. Weighing the various tactics as he had been trained to do, Andos made the obvious strategic choice.

He ran for his life.

Mika chased him for a few meters, then stopped. The adrenaline was draining out of him. As Andos sprang nimbly up the hill and over the rise, Mika fell to his hands and knees. His head throbbed. His hands stung. His body ached. And although he knew it had been in self-defense, he had just murdered two members of the Imperial government -- something told him that his life would never be the same.

* * *

At system's edge, the Star Destroyer *Coercion* pierced the vacuum like a blade cutting the fabric of space. From his personal viewing room atop *Coercion's* bridge, Governor Klime watched the stars shine below him. Among them, planets were distinguished by their unblinking, reflective light.

Silently, Klime reached out with his hand and, one by one, crushed bright planets in his grip.

A comlink beeped. Klime slapped a button on his control console. "What?"

"You asked for hourly reports, sir," the nervous aide's voice cracked.

"Proceed."

"Commander Glave's squad arrived at the drop zone with their local guide on schedule. Team One went in search of the shell-head, but have made no contact. Team Two encountered the Rabaanite... "

"... and killed him," Klime predicted.

"N-no, sir. They met with some... difficulty."

"What kind of difficulty?"

"The two stormtroopers are dead, sir. The guide escaped and rejoined Team One." The comlink fell silent as the aide awaited a response.

"Hrrmmmm." The sound came out of Klime like an animal growl. "Tell Commander Glave I expect him to rectify the situation. Immediately. Have we discovered the Rebel outpost yet?"

The comlink crackled. "No, sir. There's been no activity in the shipping lanes. No abnormal activity on either planet, nor on the uninhabited planets in the system. Intelligence believes the rumor to be a hoax..."

"It's not a hoax," Klime interrupted. "I can smell them. This system is as attractive to the Rebels as it is to us, and for the same reasons. They'll be building a landing base or spaceport somewhere, something that can house a short range strike force. Check the uninhabited worlds again for mining activity. Find it."

"Yes, sir--"

Klime slapped the comlink again and it fell silent.

He sank back into his chair, unhappy but philosophical. Glave would handle the situation on the ground. Meanwhile, he had to keep the big picture in mind. Like any worthwhile action, this one required determination and patience.

He reached out and crushed another planet in his grip.

* * *

Mika took a long swallow of water and wished for the hundredth time that he had paid more attention in his tech classes. The two pocket cruisers had been locked down with some kind of operating code. Engines, nav computer, even communications -- everything was dead until the right digital sequence was either input or bypassed. But bypassing it had been way beyond Mika's technical skills, so he'd left the two crates sulking in the dust and started on foot across the moon's dry waste.

Once he'd accepted the fact that he'd killed two stormtroopers, Mika settled down and considered his options, which were extremely limited. He was alone with a limited food supply on a barren space rock. Although everyone in the system knew where he was, no one would come look for him until they received the commnet signal.

And somewhere out there was a S'krrr warrior intent on killing him. But also out there, Mika was sure, were more Imperials. Probably many more. The two pocket cruisers were evidence of that. The main body had probably gone off to hunt the S'krrr while these two remained behind with Andos to take care of him.

A wry smile crossed Mika's face. They had gotten their priorities mixed up. Mika was sure he had Andos' overweening pride to thank for that.

But although Mika had killed two Imperials, the game was far from over. For all he knew, the other troopers had already ambushed the S'krrr and made it look like a Rabaanite plot. Their scheme could still easily succeed.

And Mika was sure that, given their strict observance of rituals, the S'krrr would be insulted by what they thought was a betrayal of the Combat. They would go to war. And the Empire would win.

Mika's only hope was that they hadn't found the S'krrr yet. If he was still alive, together they could foil the Imperial plot.

Foil the Imperial plot... the phrase echoed in Mika's head. What was he thinking? How easily he had slipped into that frame of mind. How quickly he had become a radical. This was the *government* he was talking about, after all. Could they really be that bad? Maybe they were doing all this for a good reason. Maybe even their attempt to kill him had been some sort of acceptable sacrifice for a much larger common good. Maybe Andos had been right -- that there were things going on that were beyond his grasp...

Mika imagined walking into the local magistrate's office and explaining quite calmly that there'd been a misunderstanding. What? Well, yes, he had killed two Imperial stormtroopers, but... Pardon? Yes, he was aware that stormtroopers were the Emperor's personal security force and therefore representatives of the supreme authority in the galaxy, but they were trying to kill him and--

Mika's vision ended with him being dragged off to the spice mines of Kessel, still trying to tell his story. Not good.

Besides, no good government that he could imagine would execute one of its people as coldheartedly as they'd tried to kill him. And he remembered Andos' words, "*You're a bug to these people, and they'll squash you.*" Those were the same people Leda had whispered about.

"We'll see who squashes who," Mika said, adjusting the pack on his back. He was going to stop the Imperials from killing the S'krrr. The irony of the situation was not lost on him. He had come here to kill a S'krrr warrior. Now Mika's only hope was to save him.

* * *

The hangar bay was only half-complete. Mining equipment lay scattered among bits of rubble and debris on the wide, uneven floor. Here and there, trickles of rock fell like dusty waterfalls from the high ceiling where overworked tech crews had not yet put up support beams. In the completed half of the bay, the durasteel floor gleamed. In a large alcove, four aliens of various species moved among gleaming lights and computer displays.

Sensor data was fed from hidden antennae into that alcove for digestion by a rotating crew of Rebel technicians. It was the only area of the hidden base that looked complete, yet even that had a temporary feel to it. The equipment could be disconnected, disassembled, and put on board a freighter in a matter of seconds.

Leda Kyss passed through the sensor alcove almost unnoticed. She paused only to silently name to herself the species operating the equipment: two Bothans and a Givin brought in to calibrate a new sensor. The Givin, naturally uncomfortable at the sight of exposed flesh, caught her stare and self-consciously wrapped his robe tightly about himself, then turned back to his work. She was still trying to accustom herself to the many species she had met since leaving Rabaan.

"Leda Kyss."

Leda turned. The woman who had spoken was a short and sturdy human with curly hair and an open, honest face. But Leda's eyes were drawn to the person next to her: a tall, angular man in a flight suit. She did not know his name, and he did not offer. She would have guessed he was 20 if not for his eyes, which looked like they'd seen far more than 20 years could bear.

"Yes."

The man nodded toward the woman. "Sanna told me you were here." He glanced at the sensor crew. "We should get out of their way. They're tracking a Star Destroyer hovering at system's edge, and they need to keep an eye on it."

Leda followed them out of the sensor alcove and onto the gleaming field of durasteel. The man seemed to gravitate naturally toward a large machine stationed near the entrance to the hangar bay at the edge of a wide tunnel leading to the surface. Although massive and powerful in her eyes, Leda knew that, relatively speaking, it was a gnat against the giants it so often fought.

An X-wing fighter.

"I want to thank you for your help." The man's voice was brisk. "We get a lot of support -- more and more every day -- but it's rare that someone helps us establish a new outpost."

Leda tried to hide her pleasure. "I'm glad I could help. If I can convince the rest of Rabaan to join us, you'll see that once a Rabaanite makes a decision, we stick to it." She swallowed. "But there is one thing you can do in return."

The man's angular face was implacable. "Yes?"

"Save Mika Streev."

The woman, Sanna, glanced quickly at the pilot. He seemed to have been expecting the request. "Leda, we'll do what we can. But you've seen what we've got here: We're nothing more than a tech crew, a few snub fighters, and a freighter. Hardly enough to battle one squad of TIE fighters, let alone a capital ship. We're here to establish our strike base. If the Empire gets even a whiff of our presence, that's the end of it. Period. So stealth is our key and--" he put his hand on her shoulder -- "and our priority."

"But Mika could help you. He'd be valuable to the Rebellion."

"As I recall, he wasn't very receptive to your hints. Besides," the man said, "even if he were a sworn member of the Alliance, he'd still be expendable. We all are. That's the reality of it. I've lost friends -- " Looking into his eyes, Leda saw some memory stir, and she almost thought she caught a glimpse of starfighters flashing around a distant, gleaming moon-- "Good friends. But it's a risk we take. The important thing is to prevent the war between Rabaan and S'krree. Your friend Mika will have to save himself."

* * *

Sh'shak of the S'krree was frozen in place. He did not know how long he'd been that way. He might have known, had he been reciting the mantra of time. But he was not. He was silently reciting the mantra against fear.

Fear touches me like the breath of cold wind. Fear is like cold wind.

Fear is like wind. Fear is like air.

Fear is nothing. Fear touches me like the breath of cold wind. Fear is like cold wind ...

Three meters away, on the other side of a thorn bush, a stormtrooper raised his helmet and drank from a plastic canteen. Sh'shak was close enough to touch the scars on his face.

For all their armor and equipment, stormtroopers moved quietly. Sh'shak, resting in the shade of one of the small brown patches of trees, hadn't sensed their approach until the last minute, and then he had time only to slip into a thorny hedge and freeze in place. The troopers, 10 of them in full white battle armor and unholstered blasters, had stalked through the glade clearly expecting trouble. After scouting the patch of trees, they decided to take advantage of the same shade Sh'shak had sought, and had called a halt. The troopers had unsealed their helmets, wolfed down tasteless gray rations wrapped in plastic, and trampled the thin grass where they sat. After a length of time beyond Sh'shak's comprehension, they had finally reassembled.

The scarred trooper removed his helmet completely. Sh'shak usually had trouble reading the soft, fleshy faces of humans, but this one was all too clearly cruel.

"Insect blood!" the trooper spat. "That's what I'm after. I want to know what color these shell-heads bleed." He nodded toward one of the troopers. "Report."

The trooper held up a datapad. "There's been nothing since the motion detector's last signal 40 minutes ago. He must have gotten wind of our approach and made a run for it. Nothing on thermal."

Sh'shak silently thanked whatever force had made his species cold-blooded.

"Hmmm ..." The scarred man spat. "This place is getting on my nerves. It's hot as fresh bantha fodder. You, Rabaanite!"

A tall Rabaanite stepped out of the shadows. Sh'shak's eyes glittered. He hadn't noticed the human before.

"Yes, Commander Glave?"

"You know these shell-heads better than we do. What's his next move?"

The Rabaanite shook his head. "The S'krrr are a battle-oriented species. But I'd say if he hasn't taken the fight to us by now, he's not going to. Maybe he's gone for permanent cover."

"Let's go."

The stormtroopers and the Rabaanite fanned out with their scanning team in the lead, and disappeared into the trees. Sh'shak remained motionless long after the sounds of their passing had faded. He had nowhere to go, and the little glade seemed safe enough, since the Imperials probably wouldn't check it twice. At least not yet.

In the meantime, he would sit and ponder his recent, irrefutable discovery: the Rabaanites had betrayed S'krrr to the Empire.

* * *

Mika peered over a sharp ridge and into yet another shallow valley. Nothing in sight but a gray dust and more of those stunted brown trees. He stood and trotted down into the glen. The sun was falling toward the horizon now, and he guessed that, with its thin atmosphere, the Combat Moon would grow very cold at night. He needed to find cover.

The little grove offered afternoon shade and a hiding place. As soon as he was under its canopy, he slipped out of his pack and sat down on the ground. He listened carefully, then studied the trees for even the slightest movement. When he was sure no one was around, he lay back in a bower of trampled, flattened grass and closed his eyes.

He opened them immediately. *Flattened grass?*

The movement saved his life. The energy pike whistled past his ear and sank into the ground.

I've been here before, Mika thought, rolling away and to his feet. The energy pike chased him, spinning so fast Mika did not have time to look at his attacker. He registered only vaguely the triangular head of the S'krrr warrior. Then he had to duck again. This time he wasn't fast enough. The energy pike missed him, but a blade-like forearm scraped his throat, missing his carotid artery by millimeters.

"Wait!" Mika gasped. But the energy pike came around again. No chance to dodge. Mika blocked it with his forearm. Energy leaped from the blade and into his arm, short-circuiting his nerves and paralyzing him from wrist to shoulder. Wincing, he back-pedaled and raised his good arm in a sign of truce.

"Wait!"

The S'krrr took a menacing step forward, its disk-like eyes glittering.

The triangular head swiveled quickly from side to side as it took in a sweeping 360-degree view of its surroundings. Clearly, it considered this a ruse.

"I'm not your enemy," Mika said, aware of the thick irony of his words. "I don't want to kill you."

The S'krrr's mandibles moved thickly as it spoke in heavily accented Basic. "You ask for quarter? That is against the rules of the Combat. Of course, Rabaan has already discarded the Combat ritual." Again, the insectoid stalked forward.

Mika realized that the S'krrr must have encountered the stormtroopers. He thought that Rabaan had sided with the Empire! "No! I came alone! It's the Empire! They're trying to start a war between our planets!"

Sh'shak stopped again. He had thought to kill this Rabaanite quickly. The last thing he had expected was a parley.

"I saw Rabaanites with the stormtroopers."

"You saw one Rabaanite. A tall one with dark hair. He is a traitor." The triangular head cocked to one side in a motion Mika interpreted as interest. "Prove your words."

Carefully Mika unslung his pack. He removed his half of the commnet uplink. "Here. Take it. Call your people. Call anyone. I want to get off this rock as badly as you do."

Mika placed the instrument on the ground and stepped back. The S'krrr stared at him with its unreadable face. Its head dipped toward the uplink, then up at Mika. It seemed to weigh its options.

Sh'shak stepped forward. The uplink looked real. If he could send even a brief message ...

The blaster bolt struck him as he reached for the array. It passed cleanly through him and left a smoking hole in his upper thorax. Sh'shak was hurled backwards and he fell to the ground, writhing as his trembling wings sent up agonized screams in wing-song.

Mika dropped to the ground as angry blaster bolts sizzled overhead. On his hands and knees he scrambled into deeper cover and vanished into the shadows just as stormtroopers came crashing through the trees. A roar filled the air as the two pocket cruisers came into view with the calm finality of a trap well-sprung. Commander Glave strode into the glade, his blaster still warm from its single shot. The Imperial commando planted one booted foot firmly on Sh'shak's delicate wings, pinning the S'krrr to the ground and silencing his screams.

"Stupid shell-head," Glave leaned down and hissed. "I've trapped better than you, believe me!"

Sh'shak's bladed forearms lashed out, but Glave was ready. His foot ground harder into the S'krrr's delicate wings, taking the weight out of the blow. Sh'shak let an agonized sigh out of his mandibles.

"Oh, ho!" the Imperial laughed. "A little life left in our bug, I see. Maybe we should have some fun with him before the deed gets done."

Andos objected. "Commander, he is S'krrr ... we should--"

"Don't tell me what I should do!" Glave snapped. "I'm an officer of the Emperor's stormtroopers! Stand him up!"

Two stormtroopers dragged Sh'shak to his feet, stretching his forearms to either side. Glave grinned and jammed his blaster into the S'krrr's upper thorax, next to the first wound. He pulled the trigger.

* * *

In the sensor alcove, one of the Bothans pulled the headset from his ears and grimaced in horror. He looked at Leda, then at Sanna and the pilot. "It's bad."

"We've got to do something," Leda yelled. "Please!"

Sanna turned to the man and stared at him. Reluctantly, she agreed. "This is too much to take."

The man swallowed. "If we reveal ourselves, this base is finished. All our efforts will have been wasted."

Leda plucked his blaster from its holster. "Maybe I made a mistake. I joined your Rebellion because I thought you fought against things like this. You do what you want. I can't just sit here." She rushed off into the darkness.

* * *

Sh'shak trembled but stayed on his feet. He was trying to recall the mantra against pain, but it seemed to have left his memory, and there was only pain itself. He wondered how long he would live. The scarred one, the commander, put the blaster to his upper thorax again. There was another blaster shot, but oddly, Sh'shak felt nothing. Instead the scarred man stumbled forward with a surprised look on his face, bowling over Sh'shak and both troopers holding him. The scarred trooper's reinforced armor was blackened, but it had held. Ignoring the pain, Sh'shak took advantage of the moment. Pushing the nearest trooper away, he struggled to clear himself of the tangle of arms and legs.

Suddenly two human hands grabbed him and hauled him up. Sh'shak got a quick glimpse of Mika firing a palm-sized blaster point blank at two stormtroopers.

"The... scarred one?" Sh'shak rasped.

"Got away," Mika said. "They'll be back. We need to find cover."

"I'm surprised... you didn't leave me for dead."

Mika pointed to the two blaster holes in Sh'shak's upper chest. "Body cavity in the S'krrr upper thorax. No vital organs, no circulatory function. No serious damage." He winked. "I did my homework."

Sh'shak's head twitched in a S'krrr version of a wince. "But still extremely painful."

A blaster bolt shattered a branch near Mika's head. The stormtroopers had not been driven off for long. Mika dove behind a small thicket and returned fire. Sh'shak grabbed a fallen blaster and joined him. Soon the air was alive with energy bolts.

Mika continued to fire blindly into the trees. "The commnet!" His component lay on the ground where he had placed it. "We need to send a signal."

In answer, Sh'shak dashed from their sparse cover toward the fallen component. Invisible shooters fired at him, but the S'krrr was a blur of motion. He returned to their scant cover with blasters churning up the ground around him.

Sh'shak's voice was disturbingly calm as he began to assemble the uplink. "This is an indefensible position. We will be overrun in moments."

"Not if I can help it."

The S'krrr and the Rabaanite both looked up, startled. Leda Kyss had materialized from nowhere.

"Leda!" Mika grabbed her like a man clutching a dream. Sh'shak lowered his weapon. "Leda, what are you doing here!"

"Long story," she said. "Run!"

Blaster bolts started to crash around them, but most of them struck the thick, stunted trees that shielded them. Half-blind, Mika and the wounded S'krrr followed Leda through the trees that covered their retreat.

In moments, their protection ended. From the forest edge they could see a large cave mouth only a hundred meters away -- but it was a hundred meters of flat terrain.

"Run!" Leda ordered.

Together, they dashed across the open ground. They had outdistanced their pursuers, and when they were halfway across Mika thought they would make it to the cave mouth. Then a loud whine filled his ears, and a shadow blotted out the sun.

"Cruiser!" he warned. He leaped to one side as Sh'shak and Leda leaped to the other. Turbolaser fire peppered the ground between them.

"The uplink!" Mika screamed. "Finish it!"

Sh'shak scrambled to complete the connections. "Done!" he hissed.

Then the three warriors watched, horrified, as the pocket cruiser settled gently on its repulsorlift engines between them and the cave mouth.

* * *

In the sensor alcove, a signal bleeped. One of the Bothans checked his instruments.

"Uplink signal," he said. "But it's being jammed. It won't get offplanet."

The tall angular man felt all eyes on him. The Givin seemed to be calculating his possible responses. The two Bothans waited impassively. Sanna stood next to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

He looked back at her and nodded.

* * *

The airborne cruiser continued to circle the area, forming a perimeter, as the door to the stationary vehicle opened. Six stormtroopers stepped out. Then Commander Glave. Then Andos. "Weapons!" Glave bellowed.

Mika, Leda, and Sh'shak tossed their blasters to the side. Keeping their distance, troopers gathered them up.

"All of them!" the commando roared.

Mika unstrapped his Ibarsi knife, and Sh'shak unhooked his energy pike from his wounded body. Leda raised her hands to indicate she was now unarmed.

"Well, well!" Glave said. A grin wrinkled his scarred face even further. "You've led us quite a chase, and turned a simple mission into a waste of my time!"

"You're too late!" Mika yelled. "We've already sent a signal to S'krrr! They'll be here before you can cover up the evidence!"

Glave shook his head. "No signal has left this planet. Shout all you want-- there's no one to hear."

As he spoke, the ground began to tremble. A roar came from behind him, and Glave turned to see the cave mouth flicker with light, as though a dragon lay hidden within. The roar and the light grew, and a blast of hot air struck them. With a triumphant scream, a dragon that was no dragon burst from the cave and hurled itself skyward.

An X-wing fighter.

The ship became a point of light rising up into the blue sky, then it turned with impossible agility back toward toward the surface. The airborne cruiser turned sluggishly to meet it. Both ships fired as they passed in opposite directions. The cruiser missed. The X-wing didn't. Four streaks of light pierced the other ship's shields, and the pocket cruiser vanished in a ball of fire.

On the ground, both sides watched in utter amazement. Commander Glave was the first to react. He slapped the nearest stormtrooper on the back.

"The Rebel outpost!" he shouted. "It was under our noses all the time! Get inside and signal *Coercion*!"

The trooper dashed for the cruiser.

He never made it. A blaster bolt punctured his armor at the weak neck joint and he fell like a rag doll.

Sh'shak had taken the opportunity to draw his hidden blaster. His shot was answered by others -- not from the stormtroopers, but from the cave. Sanna and the two Bothans charged. Confused by blaster fire from two directions when they had expected it from none, the troopers dove for cover on the uneven ground. Ignoring the new threat, Commander Glave fired at Sh'shak as the S'krrr took aim on him. Distracted by the S'krrr's weapon, Glave fired directly at it -- the shot blew the hold-out blaster from Sh'shak's hand. This time, Glave took more careful aim.

"No!" Mika and Leda shouted as one.

* * *

Mika dove for his Ibarsi knife. In one motion he rolled forward and grabbed the weapon. Coming up he unsheathed it smoothly and hurled it forward. The weapon cut the air, then passed cleanly through the commando's arm just above the wrist.

Too slow.

Glave had already fired. Mika turned to see that the blaster had struck... Leda.

While Mika attacked, Leda had thrown herself between the Imperial and the wounded S'krrr.

"No!" Mika screamed. He rushed forward with tears in his eyes.

He did not see Glave, ignoring his own wound, track the X-wing coming around for another attack. He did not hear the Imperial bellow a retreat, then slip into the waiting pocket cruiser with Andos close behind.

"Leda!" he dropped to his knees next to her. "Leda!"

* * *

She was surprised when the blaster bolt struck her and she felt no pain. But her jaw no longer worked. She looked at Mika, trying to invest in that look all her belief in her actions, her devotion to her cause, and most of all her words of love for him. Then she seemed to fall a second time. White light passed through her body, and two gentle hands caught her as she fell. She closed her eyes, and never opened them again. Mika let out a piercing, wordless wail.

Next to him, Sh'shak's face was impassive. There were no words of parting in his language, only the gentle flutter of the wings of memory.

* * *

The X-wing kicked up dust as it settled on its repulsorlift cushion, its ion engines growling impatiently. The angular-faced pilot leaped from the cockpit and in a few seconds he had covered the distance to the small crowd of mourners.

Mika held Leda's body in his arms. He looked at the newcomer as if hoping the pilot could save him a second time.

The pilot choked. "She... was very brave."

Mika sobbed. "She was a Rabaanite warrior."

The pilot turned to Sanna. "We have to evacuate." The Imperial ship launched the second her people were aboard. He had given pursuit, but the Imperial commander had been too smart to engage him. Shutting down his weapons and shunting all power to his shields, the pocket cruiser had weathered a blistering assault from his X-wing's lasers as it fled into space. With the Star Destroyer looming out there somewhere, he had dared pursue them only so far.

"The Bothans are jamming them," he explained to Sanna. "But they'll be out of range in seconds. So much for this base."

Sanna smiled sadly. "I didn't think you'd give in."

The pilot shrugged. He looked at Sh'shak, then at Leda. "She was right. This is what we're supposed to fight against. Let's go."

In moments the Rebels had returned to their cave and were wheeling their equipment onto a small freighter. After a few minutes, Mika and Sh'shak appeared.

The Rebel pilot stopped his work.

"We buried her," Mika said. "I thought it best to leave her behind."

"I'm sorry."

Mika's face hardened. "You say the Empire will be here soon?"

"Any minute."

"I want to leave something else behind, too."

* * *

An hour later, a swarm of TIE bombers screamed across the moon's thin sky as AT-ATs pulverized the ground beneath, giving cover to the assault team that broke into the subterranean cave. They found nothing but an open cavern with a floor made of shining durasteel, and a small, empty alcove.

Governor Klime marched into the cavern with Commander Glave and Andos at his heel. Where the commander's right hand had been, a chrome-sheathed bio-cap was in place, holding the wound in stasis until a bionic hand could be readied. The pain must have been tremendous, but Glave ignored it.

Klime's voice echoed loudly in all corners of the cavern. "Nothing?"

"Nothing, sir," Glave growled. "It must have been a small operation for them to get out so fast. I take responsibility for their escape, sir."

Governor Klime opened his hands wide. "Not to worry, commander. We must remain philosophical and flexible. Our original plan was thwarted, but we will make adjustments. We can no longer cause a war between S'krrr and Rabaan. But we will use this Rebel base as an excuse to garrison the system." Klime turned to Andos. "You will voice your public approval of the Empire's presence." It was not a question. "For your support, you will be rewarded with a high place in the reorganized governmentt."

Andos gave a tight smile and a nod. "Yes, sir."

Klime tightened both hands into fists. "Gentlemen, the ultimate goal was to bring this system into a tighter grip without these idiotic abos putting up a fight. That goal will still be achieved."

"Sir, we found something!" a stormtrooper called out from the nearby alcove.

A technician examined the item and brought it to Governor Klime. It was a small device made up of two 'pieces. A small light in the control panel indicated that it had been activated. The technician swallowed. "It's a commnet uplink, sir. It's been activated and... I think it's broadcasting on two frequencies."

Governor Klime's mouth tightened. "Are you telling me ... ?"

"Yes, sir," the technician replied. "Someone's been listening to every word we've said."

* * *

Somewhere in the empty reaches of space, a nondescript freighter and a single X-wing fighter ripped through an invisible barrier and returned to realspace.

Mika had rarely been to the stars, and he had never been outside the system. But he ignored the wondrous emptiness around him. Through a viewport, he could see the X-wing hanging in the void as he and Sh'shak listened on a headset.

"We'll have to wait a short while," the X-wing pilot was saying, "but we can probably slip you back onto your home planets without much trouble. From there, you're on your own."

"I'm not going home," Mika said simply. The speaker crackled.

"You're welcome to join the Rebellion... "

"I will join you," Mika said. "But first I need to see justice done. I need to find Andos, and that Imperial commando." In the viewport glass, his reflection hardened. "That's something I have to do alone."

"Not alone." Sh'shak's wings rustled. "I owe you my life. And I owe her. I will come with you, if you will have me."

Mika nodded.

"Then we'll take you to our rendezvous point, and arrange transportation to the nearest port." The pilot addressed the freighter's helm. "Okay, Sanna, let's go."

Both ships pointed their bows away from the void, toward the distant gleam of stars. As they arced gracefully out of the darkness, they seemed to leave in their wake a whisper of sorrow, and the quiet rustle of wings.